

Hidden salt risk to children

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High levels of salt in fast food, ready-made pasta, cereals and other meal-time treats aimed at children mean many face a ticking health time bomb, say experts. The recommended daily salt intake for adults is six grammes a day, but research by the Health Supplement Information Service shows boys regularly eat more than this and girls are dangerously close.

Figures show that daily salt intake among seven to 14-year-olds was 6.4 grammes for boys and 5.6 grammes for girls. It is also thought that salt intake may have been under reported as previous studies have not taken into account salt added to cooking or at the table. Researchers now believe that reducing salt intake by up to 42 per cent among children aged eight to 16 can lead to significant cuts in blood pressure.

The findings come in a review by leading nutrition experts from HSIS of more than 50 previously published papers and reports on the topic of children's eating habits. It claims children in the UK are risking serious illnesses later in life because of poor diet and nutrition while they are young. Health experts say youngsters' health is being hit because of high intakes of saturated fat, salt and sugar and inadequate amounts of essential vitamins and minerals and essential fatty acids from oil rich fish. While the researchers found that on average diets have improved in recent years, they say that there are still major nutritional problems that were cause for concern and need addressing urgently. There is mounting evidence that problems with child nutrition can significantly contribute to chronic and degenerative diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer. In addition, poor diets and too little exercise have led to

childhood obesity, with figures showing that one in 10 youngsters in school reception classes and this increases to 18 per cent among those aged 10 and 11.

To gauge the extent of the problem, the Health Supplement Information Service commissioned in-depth research into the quality of children's diets. Independent dietitian and public health nutritionist Dr Carrie Ruxton and Dr Emma Derbyshire, a senior lecturer in human nutrition at Manchester Metropolitan University, analysed nearly 60 previously published papers and reports on the topic. They found that intakes of essential nutrients frequently fell far short of recommended guidelines and similarly often exceeded the recommended allowances for saturated fat, sugar and salt. In particular, the researchers found that iron, calcium, magnesium, potassium and zinc are especially low in some groups. They also point to possible problems with intakes of fibre, omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin D as well as fruit and vegetable consumption. Low vitamin D levels in childhood can lead to a greater risk of bone disease later in life. Inadequate intakes of certain nutrients such as iron, iodine, folate, zinc, vitamin B12 and long-chain omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids have also been linked with affecting children's learning and intellectual ability.

Dr Ruxton said: "Overall, there has been some progress in improving children's diets, although it is slow. Intakes of fat have reduced to below dietary targets, while intakes of vitamins A and C, and calcium, have increased marginally. However, further improvements are needed. Children's salt intakes are particularly high, exceeding the maximum recommendations set for adults. There remains a clear need to improve children's diets to safeguard their future health. Despite some evidence showing beneficial changes to children's diets over the years, certain population groups still fail to consume adequate levels of micronutrients, particularly iron, zinc, magnesium and potassium.

Higher intakes of fruit, vegetables, oily fish and wholegrains would help children to meet dietary and nutrient targets. Where this is difficult, supplementation with multi-nutrient supplements and fish oil supplements, will help children to meet nutrient targets while further dietary improvements are ongoing. This is especially vital for those children and teenagers who are fussy eaters and do not like oily fish for instance, which is are full of essential nutrients such as Omega 3."

Much of the published research and data that Dr Ruxton and Dr Derbyshire focused on came from an analysis of the UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey, a rolling cross-sectional survey of food consumption, nutrient intakes and nutritional status of people aged 18 months and older in the UK. The first - and latest - report of the programme, funded by the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Health, includes in-depth data on food consumption and nutrient intakes for children aged 1.5 to 18 years taken between 2008 and 2009.

The data shows that vitamin and mineral supplements appear to make a significant contribution to overall nutrient intakes in children aged two to 17. Supplement use appears to vary between ethnic groups, with Asian or Afro-Caribbean children being most likely to take supplements, particularly cod liver oil.

However, the researchers found that children most in need of supplements are often less likely to take them. Among children aged four to 12 years, multivitamins were the most commonly-consumed supplement, although the researchers say that iron is also important as deficiency is common in UK children, especially in those who are vegetarian or have low meat intakes. The researchers found that foods fortified with vitamins and minerals - such as some breakfast cereals - can be useful, but warned that there are potential problems in relying on them. Issues can include an insufficient level of fortification for good health, or the fortified food itself may be high in sugar, salt or saturated fat.